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ABSTRACT

The intial discussion concerns attachment and separation in terms of feelings. It is asserted that the key to dealing with separation anxiety is the acceptance of infants' and toddlers' feelings by both child and adult as a means of building infant and toddler self-confidence and trust. Subsequent discussion provides specific ways child caregivers can help children feel confident about separating and lists several signs that indicate that a child may be having difficulty separating. Influences on children's feelings in the context of separation are discussed, with particular attention to the role of the caregiver in establishing an environment of trust. Substantial emphasis is given to six ways of building an environment of trust, namely: (1) allowing the child plenty of time to make the transition to the day care environment while the parent is present; (2) encouraging children to participate in saying good-bye; (3) providing to children many tangible reminders that their parents exist though they are out of sight; (4) regarding regression or shift in behavior with aplomb; (5) helping children bring a favorite toy or blanket to the day care setting; and (6) making sure that the setting is characterized by a low child/adult ratio, a sensitively responsive trained adult caregiver, and a group size of no more than 8 or 9. (RH)

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SEPARATION: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

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"INFANTS , TODDLERS AND PARENTS: PROMOTING THEIR GROWTH "

Bank Street College of Education

Infancy Institute

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While attachment and the related reactions to separation are central issues for young children,feelings about saying goodbye are not restricted to children or to school situations. Rather, separation is a life long experience that affects every one of us several times during the course of our lives. Recently, one of my students recalled going to camp when she was 9 or 10 and having "an empty feeling" because she was missing home. Just think of how many separation experiences we each have had : changing a job, moving to a new home, going on a trip (and packing),

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graduation, getting married, getting divorced, and ultimately, of course, death.

Here is an article by a woman whose parents retired to Florida leaving her to suffer an "empty nest syndrome". Listen to what she says:

> My parents have retired to Florida, and I am suffering an empty nest syndrome. They taught me the value of family, urged me to settle in town, nurtured the love of my children and then they left. I may be 31 years old and a liberated woman, but it still hurts. There are thousands of people like me, experiencing a kind of delayed separation anxiety. Our parents are leaving the old hometown and shaking our roots loose as they go....
>
> But somewhere inside, I'm uneasy. Certainly my own life, my husband's life and my children's lives are diminished by their absence. The daily calls or visits or just sightings of my mother's car parked in town were like touching down for a moment, a warm spot in each day...
>
> There is anger in me as well. The child

inside is holding her breath and turning blue; an unreasonable reaction, but let me explain.
(tells how she lived in this neighborhood since childhood, went to a local college)

Once the decision was made, my parents began shedding possessions as a dog shakes out fleas. For my husband and me, that house was part of our youth and our romance. Memories mixed with the dust and plaster as pictures came down and relics were hauled up from the basement...

Maybe part of the sadness was the air of finality. There were unmentioned but strongly felt parallels to the cleaning out and closing up that accompanies a death. My parents vacuumed up every trace of themselves, and they left town.

The woman in me shouts 'Bravo' for their daring and the new days before them. They didn't wait for widowhood or illness to force their retirement. They made a free choice.

But there is still the child in me, too,

perhaps more petulant in this time of adjustment.

Several months ago, the night before my husband and I left for a vacation alone, I heard my 4-year-old daughter crying in bed. She didn't want us to go, she said. Patiently, logically, I explained that mothers and fathers need time away to themselves. She nodded her head, endured my explanation and asked, "But who will be my mother when you're gone?"
When we said goodbye to my parents, the child in me was asking the same question.

What I am trying to convey here is the meaning of attachment in feeling terms. Attachment is the sine qua non for separation feelings. One must learn to say "hello" before one can learn to say "goodbye." If a child - or an adult - has not been strongly and positively attached to another human being, it will not make much emotional difference when a separation takes place. That is the meaning of the old saying "It's better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all." The young child who has "never loved at all" will most likely have no reaction at all to separation, and that becomes one of the times when we really need to worry.

Perhaps you have memories of starting school... of being

left by your parent on that first day. There are no doubt a wide variety of feelings stemming from this experience that range from excitement and anticipation to fear, lonliness and uncertainty.

These are all legitimate feelings - it's very usual for children as well as adults to feel nervous, tense, worried or scared even while feeling excited and delighted. This is a **KEY** to working with young children at the time of beginning group care: helping children and parents to know that it is acceptable to feel this way. It is <u>realistic to feel sad, to feel frightened, to feel lonely</u>. Think of a time when you might have said goodbye to someone you love and remember how you felt. Such a recall can help you appreciate how little children feel when they say goodbye. You can also understand something of how the children's parents might feel.

The reason this approach is key to helping children is that in legitimizing their feelings you build in self confidence and trust. This is the opposite of conventional wisdom that says "don't talk about it." These are the ingredients that children need to make a successful beginning in group care or school. If they are continually worried about where their parents are, or worried about feeling lonely, they will not be able to use their energy for the normal pursuits of learning and exploration. If you try to distract a child, or otherwise minimize their feelings about being left you are giving them the message that their feelings are not important, not worthy. But when you show that you understand how they feel and that you will help them then you

contribute greatly to children's sense of power. In doing this, you give them the opportunity to grow - to conquer a difficult situation - to believe that they have the stuff inside themselves with which to solve problems - and to learn that there are grown ups in the world on whom they can rely to help them. These are important learnings for young children and you, as their teacher, have an incomparable opportunity to help children and parents.

Here are some specific means you can use to help children feel confident about separating:

Post photographs of each child's family in the cubby or on a low wall.

Use a tape of the child's parent reading a familiar story or singing a song.

Explain to a child where the parent is at that moment and when he or she is coming back.

Help the child dictate a letter to, or draw a picture for, the parent.

In block play, encourage a child to build his/her house and pretend to come to school.

Give a child as much control as possible in as many situations as possible: e.g. do you want mashed potatoes or peas? do you want to paint or play with dough? do you want this story or that one?

Help a child make plans for each day's leaving.

Encourage the child to bring something from home that acts

as a transitional object... or something that the parent leaves with him or her such as a hankie, or a pocketbook, etc.

Read stories about starting school, about separations, about friendships, about saying goodbye.

Let children talk about their feelings and what their ideas are - some are worried that their parents won't know when or where to pick them up.

It is important to be aware of several signs that may indicate that a child is having a hard time separating:

crying
refusal to eat
refusal to sleep at nap time
aggression toward children or teachers
increased thumb sucking or wetting
shadowing the teacher
having trouble making friends
silence or refusal to speak

It is easier for children to bear anger and protest when the internal image of the parent is integrated --when the child accepts both elements of the parent: the good (gratifying) and the bad (frustrating). But an infant or toddler may not have reached this level of development and so finds separations very trying - especially so around 7 to 9 months and again around 16/17 months to 22/26 months. The internal image that offers soothing comfort may not always be available to the child under

three in times of great stress. Out of sight is out of mind - it can be a very frightening experience.

No wonder it is so difficult to learn to say goodbye! It takes so long just to become attached. Yet learning to separate is a "developmental necessity" if a child is to grow into an autonomous, related human being.

As people working with children under three we need to be aware not only of the child's phases of development but of the feelings of the parents - and our own feelings as well. Separation reactions touch us all and arouse feelings of grief, loss and anger - all feelings akin to mourning. The major difference between children's feelings and those of adults is that children think the feelings will never end. Children do not see beginnings and endings as we do - they just feel what IS. We adults have had experiences to teach us that though we feel sad now, soon we'll feel better. Children don't know that.

Children's feelings have been shown to be influenced by their parent's feelings. In a study by Ellen Hock of the effects of maternal anxiety on infants in the transition to day care, four factors were identified as underlying mothers' concerns about leaving their children (Hock, 1986);

1. her own personality attributes that lead to feelings of depression and fear about separation and loss.
2. her conviction that mothers are uniquely capable of caring for their child - any option other than exclusive maternal care elicits guilt and anxiety.
3. her perception of her child's ability to adapt

4. her belief about women's roles - e.g. if she is highly invested in a traditional concept of the maternal role she will be more anxious about job related mother child separation.

Children's reactions to separation are also influenced by their individual differences. Some children are more sensitive to separation than others. Some children are more outgoing than others. Some are shy - a recent article in the NY Times (4/8/88) describing research by Kagan, Reznick and Snidman found that a predisposition to shyness seems to be inborn and that the tendency may stay with children as they grow, especially if they are exposed to constant stress. Some children express their feelings openly while others are restrained. But all young children need adult help during the separation process to avoid feeling abandoned. When they are helped and supported in using their coping resources they will emerge feeling competent, knowing they can cope and knowing on whom they can rely to ease their pain.

What can we, who work with children from birth to three, do to insure that separations become a positive growing process rather than a problem? Primarily, we need to establish an environment of trust - the main ingredient of which is YOU. Children need to know that what you say is true and that what you do is for the purpose of protecting, helping and encouraging them. I would like to elaborate on six ways to build this environment of trust:

1. In a child care situation, whether in your own home or in

a center, allow plenty of time for the child to make the transition with the parent present. Research shows that parental presence in a new setting gives the child security and a feeling of control. Parental absence in a strange setting arouses feelings of powerlessness in a very young child. No matter what anyone says, don't drop and run, don't sneak out. These methods simply teach the child that adults can't be trusted. The transition from parental care to other care needs to be gradual. This isn't always easy when the parent must go to work but professionals can support mothers in trying to work out accommodations between workplace and child care place. Time invested in the beginning means a healthier return in the long run - for both mother and baby. It's <u>always</u> hard to leave a baby and harder for some than for others. The gradual, slow and supported transition from parent to other is a step toward an environment of trust.

2. Encourage children to participate in saying goodbye. Hugging, kissing, crying, waving at the window or door, saying "I'll miss you." are all ways to get feelings out in the open. Once out they are easier to handle. Telling children that mom will be back while they are saying goodbye is very important because young children are not always sure this is so.

3.Since it takes time for children under three to realize that the pain of separation will be relieved by the pleasure of reunion,provide many tangible reminders that their parents exist though they are out of sight. Photographs of parents, siblings, grandparents, pets are very reassuring evidence of adult

constancy. Covered with clear contac the photos become almost indestructible. Audio (not video) tapes of the parent reading a favorite story may be helpful to a toddler who is familiar with this form of technology. A phone call may be encouraging to some children.

4. Regard regressions or shifts in behavior with aplomb. The toddler who was potty trained may have many losses of control during a separation period. One who had given up the bottle or pacifier may request it again. A child may bite or hit occasionally, resist going to sleep, begin waking at night, refuse to eat, have frequent tantrums. These behaviors are typical of toddlers and may have nothing to do with separation - or they may. It will take the sensitivity of the parent and the caregiver to make the decision.

5. Help children bring a favorite toy or blanket or other cozy to the new setting. Sometimes something belonging to the parent becomes the security object. These objects mean home and parent to children.

6. Make sure that the new care setting, if it is outside the home, is characterized by three main features that are the hallmarks of high quality. I have saved this for last because it is the most important.

> a. A low child/adult ratio - no more than 3 children under age 3 to an adult.Research shows that fewer children per teacher means fewer separation problems. (Bloom-Feshbach, S.1987).

b. A sensitively responsive trained adult caregiver. Children this age require intense, personal, loving, responsive, understanding attention. Research reveals that opportunity for access to the teacher is the environmental variable of significance. (Bloom-Feshbach, S., 1987) It is appropriate adult interaction that supports children's attempts at coping with separation.

c. Small groups of no more than 8 or 9 children are necessary because children under three are easily overstimulated by numbers.

High quality care - few children, many teachers who are well trained -- means very large expense. How long can we as a society tolerate a child care industry in which the caregivers, who are the main ingredient of quality care, are paid less than bartenders and zookeepers and have a turnover rate of over 40% ? The proposed ABC federal legislation, Act for Better Child Care, to provide federal support for child care is a first important step in the right direction. I urge each of you to pressure your senators and representatives for their commitment to ABC. Our children are counting on us.

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